The Non-existence of Ontological Categories: A defence of Lowe

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0 – Abstract

This paper addresses the ontological status of the ontological categories as defended within E.J. Lowe's four-category ontology (kinds, objects, properties/relations, and modes). I consider the arguments in Griffith (2015) against Lowe's claim that ontological categories do not exist, and argue that Griffith's objections to Lowe do not work once we fully take advantage of ontological resources available within Lowe's four-category ontology. I then argue that the claim that ontological categories do not exist has no undesirable consequences for Lowe's brand of realism.

1 – Lowe's Argument

E.J. Lowe's argument that the ontological categories do not exist is certainly brief. It is included amongst a more general defence and description of his realist four-category ontology. It is a realist proposal in that the differences and similarities between entities that fall into each category are in no way dependent upon how we describe or think about those entities.

Following Griffith, we can reconstruct the basic argument as follows (found in Lowe 2006: section 3.3):

> (1) All entities can be categorized.
>
> (2) Ontological categories cannot be categorized.
>
> (3) Ontological categories are not entities. (Griffith 2015: 26)

The conclusion is the claim that the ontological categories do not exist, or, put another way, are not elements of being. The argument certainly seems to be valid; (1) is a reasonable premise that all who engage in realist categorical ontology are likely to accept; (2) has to be the premise that we reject if we are to reject the conclusion.

I will not rehearse Lowe's arguments in favour of (2) in this section as they will be discussed in turn in the subsequent sections. It is worth noting though that they all share a similar theme. That is that the ontological categories cannot themselves be categorised because in some way the categories themselves do not have the features required to be instances of the categories. If this claim is correct, then, as the four categories are exhaustive, Lowe would certainly be right in concluding that the ontological categories are "not to be included in a exhaustive inventory of what exists" (2006: 43).[1]

2 – Some Preliminaries

In the previous section I outlined the basic structure of Lowe's argument that ontological categories are not further elements of being. Following Griffith, premise (2) is of most interest to us. It is (2) that Griffith denies.

We should note straight away the ambiguity in how (2) is phrased. (2) holds that 'Ontological categories cannot be categorised'. There are two ways of reading (2), and what Lowe's aims might be when stating something that amounts to it. Either we can read Lowe as saying that there is no way at all – that it is not possible within any ontology – to categorise ontological categories; or we can read Lowe as saying that, within his own particular ontological system, ontological categories cannot be categorised. The difference between these two readings is clear. I think that there are good reasons to think that Lowe intends the second, in a sense weaker, reading. This would mean that his argument is trying to show that *within his ontological system* the ontological categories cannot be categorised, and subsequently are not elements of being.

First, Lowe makes his argument within his book *The Four-Category Ontology*. The book is very plausibly intended primarily (if not overwhelmingly) to be an introduction to and defence of Lowe's own ontology, with arguments in favour of each of its components and an illustration of the explanatory power that the ontology

[1] I focus here solely on Lowe's solution to the problem of the existence or non-existence of ontological categories. This is not to presuppose that Lowe's solution is the only nor that it is the best solution to this problem.

possesses with respect to a wide range of broader metaphysical issues. Perhaps Lowe does not make this clear in the passages in which he is putting forward his argument that ontological categories cannot be categorised, but I think that we can conclude that this is his intention from at least one other passages in the book. At a later time, when discussing how the ontological square might alter commonly accepted logical syntax, Lowe states:

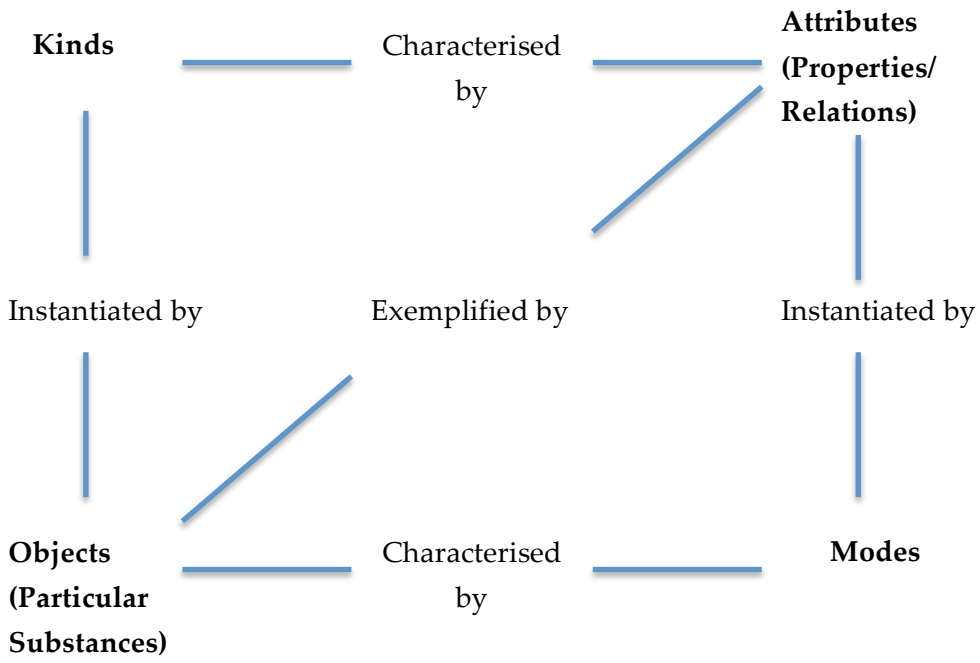
> I do not expect this ontological scheme to seem entirely compelling simply on the basis of the very sketchy account of it that I have provided here, but it is not vital for my present purpose that I should be able to convince the reader of its correctness. My current purpose is merely to persuade the reader that it is legitimate and indeed desirable to tailor one's theory of logical syntax to one's ontological convictions. For this purpose, I need nothing more than the reader's concurrence that the four-category ontology as I have sketched it is at least coherent and worthy of consideration. (2006: 76)

I think the same goes generally for this book. Elsewhere, Lowe has produced his arguments against other ontologies; in *The Four-Category* he intends to propose an ontology, illustrating its consequences, limits, and explanatory power. This would only support the weaker reading of premise (2).

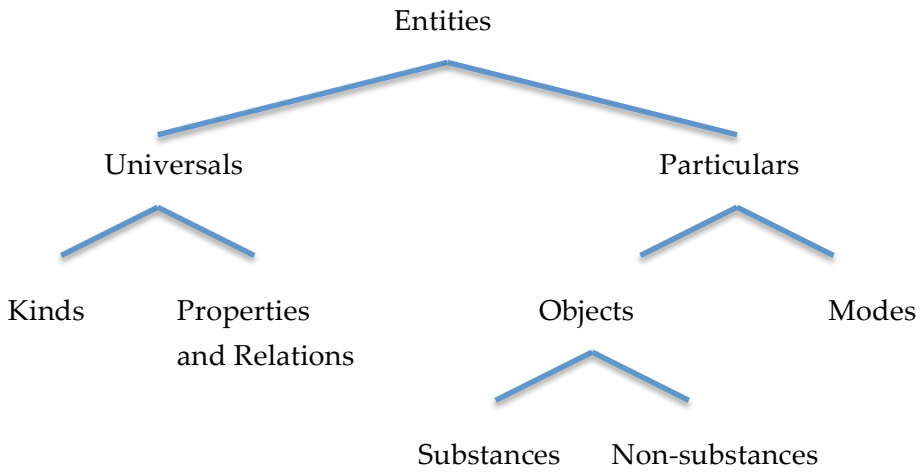
Further to this, Lowe's claim is largely supported by appealing to the definitions that he has himself given for the ontological categories. Appealing to such definitions would clearly be circular if the intention was to defend the stronger thesis that ontological categories can in principle not be categorised. But this appeal is perfectly justified if I am correct that Lowe's intention is to say that, *within his own ontology*, ontological categories cannot be categorised. Of course, this claim then rests upon the plausibility of the ontology more broadly, but that is an issue that we can put to one side here, and it not the source of the arguments that Griffith makes against Lowe. If Lowe's ontology is to be criticised for that feature, then its failure there needs to be weighed against its other claimed strengths. It certainly does not seem to be the case

that the failure to say that the ontological categories can themselves be categorised is enough to reject an entire ontology outright.

This distinction in how to read premise (2) may not seem important initially, but I will argue that a number of the claims that Griffith makes against Lowe fail to recognise that the arguments must always be seen within the context of Lowe's ontology. Griffith's claims often rest on rejecting assumptions that Lowe makes about his four-category ontology, and whilst Lowe's claims and his entire ontology might be flawed, it is not relevant to whether Lowe's ontology can categorise ontological categories. Given how important this will be later in the paper, I will now outline some key parts of Lowe's four-category ontology, beginning with Lowe's 'ontological square' (2006: 18):



Lowe in his ontology makes an exhaustive and exclusive distinction between universals and particulars. Importantly, "the terms 'particular' and 'universal' themselves, we may say, do not strictly denote categories, however, because they are transcategorial, applying as they do to entities belonging to different basic categories" (2006: 21). This is crucial in that Lowe's ontology, as he readily admits, does not contain just four-categories, but rather four *fundamental* categories. This can be seen in this reproduced diagram from Lowe (2006: 39):



Although the might initially appear to be, the categories of 'particular', 'universal', and 'entity' "are not more fundamental than those of the third level because they are mere abstractions and do no serious ontological work on their own account" (Lowe 2006: 39). (The 'third level' here refers to the fundamental categories of kinds, objects, properties/relations, and modes.) The lack of serious ontological work being shouldered by the universal/particular distinction is because whilst it is an important distinction, "it serves to explain nothing in ontology that is not fully explicable in terms of the defining features of the four categories at the third level" (2006: 39). In other words, and this will be important later, the distinction is explained by the features of the four fundamental categories rather than explaining the features of the categories. The explanatory priority is clear in Lowe's work, and *within his ontology* it justifies why the categories of universal and particular do no ontological work (I will return later to why the category of 'entity' also does no ontological work within Lowe's ontology).

Given this exhaustive and exclusive distinction between entities, if ontological categories are to be categorised within Lowe's ontology, they must either fall into one of the two categories that are universal (kinds and properties/relations), or the two that are particular (objects/modes). If they cannot be so categorised, then they cannot be elements of being. Griffith accepts with Lowe that the ontological categories cannot be particular, leaving only two possible ontological categories for the categories themselves to be instances of. I will split my discussion of Griffith's arguments into two sections, the first concerning a group of claims that the

categories could be categorised as universal properties, and the second that the categories could be categorised as kinds.

3 - Categories Categorised as Universals

The first argument that Griffith rejects is Lowe's claim that the categories cannot be universal properties because "a universal is that which has (or, in a weaker version, that which can have) instances" (2006: 39). Lowe here means universal in the sense of either universal properties or kinds, as both have, or can have, instances. However, Griffith focuses on the question of whether the ontological categories could be categorised as universal properties. He does not comment on this argument from Lowe with respect to whether it rules out the ontological categories being categorised as kinds despite that category also being universal. Griffith instead produces an alternative argument about categories as kinds, which I discuss in section 4. In the rest of this section, I follow Griffith in using 'universals' to refer to what Lowe would more specifically call universal properties.

The argument is about higher-level universals. Lowe has claimed that a universal is that which has or can have instances. Griffith correctly points out that "we may hold instead that the defining feature of universals is simply that they have (or can have) instances, whether particular or universal" (2015: 30). Indeed this is available to Lowe because he accepts that the instances of a universal could themselves be universals (2006: 89). Lowe therefore needs a reason for rejecting that ontological categories are not higher-order universals.

The reason given is that the higher-order universals that the different categories would belong to would be different, and thus no real universal links them. For example: the category of kinds would be a second-order universal as its instances are other kinds that are themselves universals; whilst the category of objects would be a first-order universal as its instances are particular substances. Griffith objects that "even if these categories belong to different categories in this sense, they are still both universals" (2015: 30). The claim is that there could be some additional level to

Lowe's ontology which all the ontological categories are instances of, and thus this additional level is a universal (as it has, or can have, instances).

Griffith is correct in a sense to say that this is a possibility. It might be the case that some ontologies can allow for multi-level universals where the instances are themselves universals of differing orders (first, second, third etc.). The issue will be whether *within Lowe's ontology*, can we have universals whose instances are of different orders. Griffith does also point out that Lowe has an argument that this cannot be the case:

> But what now about the category of universals itself? If that is a universal, of what order is it? It is hard to see how it could be of any order, because a universal of any order whatever must belong to the category of universals – and so if the category of universals is a universal of some order, it seems that it must, absurdly, be of a higher order than itself. (2006: 42)

After all, if we want to say that the ontological categories can be categorised, then we should certainly say that they should all belong to the same category. Therefore, if the particular category of universals cannot itself be shown to be a universal, then none of the ontological categories of Lowe's ontology are universals. Griffith also accepts that if Lowe is right that universals must be of a particular order then this absurdity follows (2015: 31). So the question now has to be what reasons are we given for rejecting Lowe's argument against the category of universals being a universal. Griffith offers two claims for this.

First, that we have no reason for accepting the assumption Lowe is offering, providing the examples of the property of 'being a higher order property' and the property of 'being a property' as cases that exist but might have instances that are higher-order than themselves (2015: 31). Second, that this assumption "entails that no universal is self-instantiating" (2015: 31). Griffith simply states this as false, stating that the property of 'being a property' is itself a property as evidence for this falseness.

However, each of these reasons fail. The first fails as we have reason, *within Lowe's ontology*, for rejecting these kinds of properties. Lowe's argument, as Griffith notes (2015: 31fn), is that we have no reason posit the higher order property of being a colour property as a constituent of the truthmaker for the statement 'the property of being red is a colour property.' Instead, "one possibility is that what makes it the case that a certain property is a colour-property is the fact that objects bearing the property are, in virtue of bearing it, coloured in one way or another" (2006: 71). Griffith claims that this fact does not explain properly why the property is a colour property:

> "if object O is colored because O bears F, it is presumably because of the nature of F as a color property that O is colored. But if O is colored because F is a color property, then F is not a color property because O is colored (in virtue of having F), given the asymmetry of explanation. On the other hand, if F instantiated the property of being a color property that would explain the truth of 'F is a color property.'" (2015: 31fn).

However, I think there is good reason to think Lowe would reject this analysis given the ontological tools available within his ontology. Let us clarify the picture within Lowe's ontology: Object O is coloured because it bears F. F will be a particular mode; F will be an instantiation of a universal property, U; O will exemplify U; and O is an instantiation of some universal kind, K, where K is characterised by U. We thus have filled out Lowe's ontological square. Of course, above this all is the non-ontologically load bearing category of an entity. Griffith seems to use 'object' to refer to what Lowe would say is the entity, with the object being the particular substance. This problem will be relevant again in the next section.

Within this system it seems correct to say that we have no need for the higher order property of 'being a colour property'. F is a colour property just because it is an instantiation of some universal U. Hence the higher-order property of 'being a colour' is not part of the truthmaker for the claim. The truthmaker instead consists in

the particular property (mode), and the universal property. The truthmaker is that the mode F is an instantiation of U.

Of course we might ask what U itself is – it is the universal 'redness', or is it the universal 'coloured'. But Lowe is clear that he thinks that such questions are not directly within the realm of metaphysics. Which things exist and which category they fall into is (at least partly) a matter for empirical science. As Lowe states: "metaphysics should not be in the business of dictating to empirical scientists precisely how they should categorize the theoretical entities whose existence they postulate. Metaphysics supplies the categories, but how best to apply them in the construction of specific scientific theories is a matter best left to the theorists themselves, provided that they respect the constraints which the categorial framework imposes" (2006: 19). It seems therefore that within Lowe's ontology at least, we have no good reason for thinking that such troublesome universals exist, and Lowe's claim against them stands.

Griffith's second point was that the view "entails that no universal is self-instantiating" (2015: 31), offering that the property of 'being a property' is itself a property as an example. However, we have already seen that we have no need for such higher-order properties. Instead, some mode instantiates some universal property. Griffith's claim that the property of 'being a property' is itself a property, *read within Lowe's ontology (*as it should in a paper about Lowe's view on the ontological status of the ontological categories), makes use of two different meanings of the term 'property' which is a specific category for Lowe (this is perhaps why Lowe often referred to universal properties as 'attributes'). If 'being a property' did exist, and is a property, then it would need to be given the appropriate mode/universal analysis.

Furthermore, even if the above does fail, it is hardly without support that no set can be a member of itself. As a set, the property of 'being a property' would have to be just such a member. Either way, Lowe's claim that universals in his ontology cannot have instances that are of different orders is reasonable and defendable.

Griffith's last claim that the categories could be categorised as universals is the easiest to counter, but is revealing towards the problem I've tried to highlight as perhaps underlying the two previous claims. Lowe argues that the ontological categories cannot be categorised as universals because the category of objects (particular substances) cannot itself be a universal because it cannot be either a property or a kind. This is because in Lowe's ontology, properties have modes, not objects, as instances. Thus, the "problem is supposed to be that the property of 'being an object' would have objects rather than modes as instances" (Griffith 2015: 31). Griffith's counter is that there is "a simple response to this would be to reject Lowe's particular way of organizing the four categories, i.e., to deny that properties have (or exclusively have) modes as instances" (2015: 31).

However, this is clearly unsatisfactory with regards to a question of the status of the ontological categories *within Lowe's ontology*. It might be that some alternative ontology could be developed and defended in line with this. In such an ontology, the ontological categories might be able to be categorised and so shown to be elements of being. But as I stressed earlier, that is not within the remit of what Lowe is trying to show. The natural way, in line with the rest of *The Four-Category*, is to read premise (2) in a weaker sense such that Lowe's aim is to show that within his ontology the ontological categories cannot be categorised. It is a separate matter as to whether such categorisation is possible in other ontologies, and Lowe's failure to show that cannot be taken to be an argument against his claims about what is possible within his ontology.

This is revealing, though, as to the possible source of the weaknesses in the other claims against Lowe. The claims seem to fail to locate Lowe's arguments about what can and cannot be within an ontological category within the broader claims and structure of that ontology. This is especially the case in that Lowe's claim (correct or not) is that the features of the four fundamental categories explain the distinction between universals and particulars rather than that distinction explaining the features of the categories. Given this, it is hardly surprising that we cannot create some category of universals that explain, amongst others, the category of universals.

This would be entirely circular if it was the case. Instead, the abstract category of universals that does no ontological work is explained by the nature of the two categories, properties/relations and kinds, which it contains. Again, we might provide reasons against Lowe's conception and against his broader ontology, but this would support his claim that within his ontology at least, ontological categories cannot be universals.

4 - Categories Categorised as Kinds

We have already noted that Lowe takes the universal/particular distinction to be both exhaustive and exclusive, and that the ontological categories cannot be categorised as particulars. Having defended why, in Lowe's ontology, the ontological categories cannot be categorised as properties/relations, it remains to discuss whether the categories might be kinds.

Lowe's argument against this turns on the failure of the category of objects to be a kind. As also already noted, if one of the ontological categories cannot be categorised in a certain way, then none of the categories can be categorised. So if the ontological categories are to be categorised then they need to be instances of the same category. However, the category of objects cannot be a kind because kinds bestow a single set of identity conditions on the objects that belong to them. A posited highest kind 'object' could not bestow identity conditions for all of its instances given that such entities have very different identity conditions (2006: 43). Given this, the category of object cannot be a kind as there is no single set of identity conditions that the kind 'object' would bestow upon the objects that belong to the kind.

Griffith's response is to undercut the argument by trying to show that this limits Lowe's ability to say that terms such as 'organism' express kinds. The reason for this is that terms such as 'organism', 'substance', and 'animal' do not supply one set of identity conditions upon the objects that they apply to. Many things satisfy 'organism', and objects, Griffith claims, instantiate the kind 'organism' in virtue of instantiating other kinds such as 'dog', or 'cat'. This means that the kind 'organism'

supplies more than one set of identity conditions upon the objects to which it applies. Therefore we might ask why this cannot be the case for 'object'.

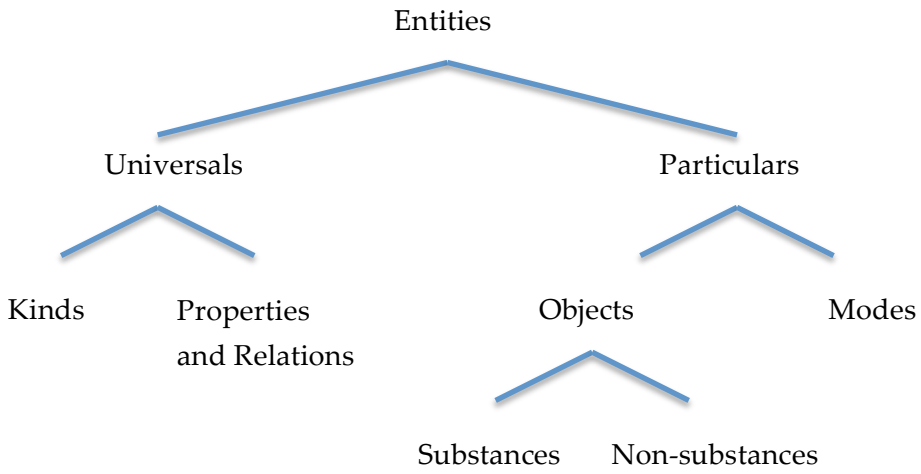
However, I think that this rests on a confusion. If Griffith means 'object' in the sortal sense in which I can say that the room I am in contains many objects, then this follows. But for the argument to work against Lowe, it must be shown that Lowe's specific notion 'object' could be a kind. 'Object' for Lowe means a particular substance. So let us try to reformulate the claim. It is that the category of particular substance cannot itself be a kind; and this is because no single set of identity conditions could be given for the kind. Note here, it is again not valid to object to Lowe's claim that this is what a kind is. This claim might independently be incorrect, but the question again is whether ontological categories within Lowe's ontology could be categorised in line with the weaker reading of premise (2).

Let us consider the claim that no single set of identity conditions could be given for the kind 'particular substance'. We therefore want an identity condition for the kind 'particular substance' of the form:

> Particular substance: If x and y are particular substances, then x is the same particular substance as y iff there is some K such that x is the same K as y

I will go through what seem to me to be the main options for fleshing this out, all of which are unsatisfactory.

Perhaps, first, we might think that all objects that fall under the kind 'particular substance' are substances. This would seem to be the most obvious route. However, we must remember that within Lowe's ontology the category of 'objects' actually allows for both substances and non-substances. If is a further matter whether both have instances; but the ontology should not rule either out a priori. That Lowe thinks this can be seen from the hierarchy that he draws replicated again below (2006: 39):



From this we can clearly see that the notion of substance could not provide an identity condition for the kind 'particular substance'. Not all entities that fall under the kind are substances as some are non-substances. Even if no entities should turn out to be non-substances, we should not rule out such entities a priori.

The notion of 'object' that Griffith suggests is another possibility. However, this too will not suffice to give us a set of distinct identity conditions for the kind 'particular substance'. Firstly, the term cannot be being used in the way that Lowe uses the term, else clear circularity would occur. What Griffith must have in mind is instead some sort of general sortal notion of 'object'. This would be closer to the term 'thing'. However, as has been argued by Thomasson recently, the general sortal term 'object' possesses no clear semantic content when used in this way. This means that "we can only answer the question 'is there some object?' by way of answering the various sortal-specific existence questions" (2015: 109). Thomasson's point here, although used for different purposes, is that no application conditions – the semantic analogue of metaphysical identity conditions – can be given for the general sortal 'object'. I see no reason why Lowe would not also embrace this conclusion with respect to this use of 'object' (rather than the more precise use of the term to refer to a particular substance within the four-category ontology). Trying to use such a general semantically empty sortal here would not give us any identity conditions for the kind 'particular substance' that all entities that fall under that kind share.

The last general notion that we might try would be that of entity. This might also be the general notion that Griffith is hinting towards with the discussion of 'object' as a kind. Thus all things that fall under the kind 'particular substance' are entities. However, whilst this is true, this is clearly unsatisfactory within Lowe's ontology. First, there is already an abstract category of entity, although it does no ontological work. As Lowe states, "everything whatever that does or could exist may be categorized as an 'entity'" (2006: 7). This is clearly not a suitable way to understand the kind 'particular substance' as this would include all instances of the other categories as instances of the category 'objects' (or if we maintain the translation of Lowe's specific terminology, the category of 'particular substance').

Second, and connected to this, the notion of 'entity' cuts across both universals and particulars for Lowe. Given that we have accepted with Lowe that a kind must bestow a single set of identity conditions on the objects that fall under that kind, it is hard to see how any such single set of identity conditions could be found. It is very hard to see what sort of identity conditions would allow for such disparate natures within a single kind. Indeed, given that we accepted that universals and particular is an exhaustive and *exclusive* distinction, I cannot see how any single set could even in principle be given.

Third, much like the abstract categories of 'universal' and 'particular', within Lowe's ontology the notion of 'entity' only gets any content from the nature of the four fundamental categories. Remember for Lowe, these abstract categories are explained by the four fundamental categories not the other way round. Any attempt to introduce a general catch-all sortal term 'object' in the way that Griffith does would be equivalent to Lowe's notion of 'entity', and thus to use it to explain the ontological categories is to fail to see the explanatory asymmetry within the ontology under consideration.

(Note that we cannot even use a notion like 'instantiated'. This is ruled out because Lowe's ontology should again not a priori decide the status of non-instantiated entities. Perhaps there are some, perhaps not. Given the purpose of an ontology of this sort is to categories all things that are more neutrally elements of being, our basic

ontological picture should not dictate whether non-instantiated entities are elements of being or not.)

5 – Maintaining Realism

In this last, briefer section, I wish to comment on whether Lowe's position that the ontological categories are not themselves elements of being puts his brand of realism in danger. The threat is that if we are nominalists about ontological category predicates, then what is to stop us being nominalists about other predicates? Why does nominalism in one area not lead to a more widespread nominalism. Lowe's argument here is simple:

> As a first defensive move, we can, of course, point out that not every meaningful predicate, whether monadic or relational, need or indeed can be supposed to denote an existing property or relation – so that it is not obligatory to suppose that predicates such as 'is a universal' or 'instantiates' denote, respectively a monadic and a relational universal. (2006: 46)

The claim just is the well-supported thought that just because we have the predicate, does not mean that we have to accept the universal. There are relatively few that deny this claim. Griffith, though, says that "the challenge is to supply some reason for thinking that nominalism about ontological categorical predicates does not lead to nominalism about other predicates" (2015: 29).

This challenge seems to have already been met by Lowe. Our ontology is meant to apply to all entities. This means that anything that cannot be situated within our ontology – is not an instance of any of the four fundamental categories – is not an element of being. The preceding section has argued that the ontological categories are not elements of being for this very reason. This is why we have good reason to be nominalists about them. As for other predicates such as 'is red' and 'is spherical', this would seem to be a further matter. Pending some additional argument, the universals that these predicates would refer to can be situated within Lowe's ontology. This means that they at the very least *could* exist. It does not mean that they

do exist, as this would be an empirical matter within Lowe's broader metaphysical account.

Of course it may turn out that the predicates 'is red' and 'is spherical' do refer, but do not refer to universals, which Griffith assumes. This is in line with Lowe's stated view: "metaphysics should not be in the business of dictating to empirical scientists precisely how they should categorize the theoretical entities whose existence they postulate. Metaphysics supplies the categories, but how best to apply them in the construction of specific scientific theories is a matter best left to the theorists themselves, provided that they respect the constraints which the categorial framework imposes" (2006: 19).

Putting it another way, the threat of nominalism about some predicates leading us to nominalism about some other predicates simply does not exist. Each predicate needs to be taken on a case-by-case basis. If what the predicates are taken to refer to cannot be categorised at all, then we have good reason to be nominalists about that predicates. Otherwise, it is partly an empirical matter as to where to categorise those referring entities. There simply seems to be no slippery slope from a local nominalism to a global form. There seems to be nothing inherently troublesome about maintaining Lowe's realist ontology that is aimed at determining what ontological categories are, what categories we should acknowledge, how categories are organized, and how categories are to be identified and distinguished (2006: 6), whilst being nominalists about ontological category predicates. We can therefore fully accept the weaker version of premise (2), and state that Lowe is correct that, within his ontology, ontological categories are not elements of being.

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